ARTICLE APPEARED
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THE WASHINGTON STAR
29 April 1978

Q and A

Gen. Walters Says Critics Damage CIA

Retired Army Lt. General Vernon Walters, former deputy CIA director, has had a career as linguist, diplomat and administrator which embraced many dramatic events. Walters, author of "Silent Missions," was interviewed by Washington Star Staff Writer Jeremiah O'Leary.

Question: *You are noted as a linguist. What languages do you speak?*

Walters: I speak eight languages but I only like to translate in five. I don't want to have things like this Polish business happen to me, so I like to limit my translation to those languages which I feel I can really master any situation in, which are, besides English obviously, French, Spanish, Italian and German.

Q: *There are reports that one didn't need a translator to handle the language exchanged by Harry Truman and Douglas MacArthur. You were there, what was it like?*

A: I worked in the White House under Mr. Truman. I went with (Averell) Harriman to see Gen. MacArthur in the beginning of the Korean War, the darkest days of the Korean War, and then a couple of months later I went with Mr. Truman to his first major meeting with MacArthur. That's where the first sparks flew. One little episode: the president sat Gen. MacArthur at his right in a small weather shack, and MacArthur filled his pipe and struck the match and looked at Mr. Truman and said: "You don't mind if I smoke, do you?" And it was really so far along that it would have been rude of Mr. Truman to say no, and he said "Go right ahead, General, I've had more second hand smoke blown in my face than any other man in America."

Q: *Is it true that Truman ordered his pilot to circle Wake Island until he was sure that MacArthur's plane had landed so that the general would have to wait instead of himself?*

A: Absolutely false. Gen. MacArthur arrived the night before and Mr. Truman arrived at daybreak. What is true is that Gen. MacArthur walked over and shook hands with him without saluting him. Years later, at Independence, I asked Mr. Truman if I could ask an indiscreet question. He said that he was a specialist in them, go ahead, and I asked him "did you notice at Wake Island . . . " and he cut me off. He said, "that Gen. MacArthur did not salute? You're goddam right I noticed it."

Q: *You were with Eisenhower in Geneva after the U-2 was shot down. The United States was in a very bad position there, because hadn't we denied that there was any U-2 plane and then the Russians cunningly brought forth not only the pilot but also the wreckage?*

A: I think first of all that we had announced it was a weather plane that had gotten off its route. But the interesting reaction to that was when President Eisenhower admitted he knew about it, most Americans tended to think of that as a rather forthright and a rather upright thing; the Russians regarded it as a gesture of supreme contempt. No Russian leader would have ever admitted such a thing, and their interpretation was: if Eisenhower doesn't mind admitting it, he doesn't give a damn what we think and thinks we can't do anything. So their reaction to us admitting it was one of rage and fury.

Q: *While you were military attache in Paris you not only made the United States' first contacts with the Chinese but were involved in the also-secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese. How did you work that?*

A: I received orders to accompany Dr. Kissinger to meet with the North Vietnamese in private meetings. The public meetings were getting nowhere, the North Vietnamese were using them as propaganda forums, it took months to decide the shape of the table and who would sit where. For three years I was a go-between in the negotiations between the American government and the North Vietnamese government. I met them 50 or 60 times. These were tough sessions. On one occasion the North Vietnamese negotiator, Le Duc Tho, suggested to Dr. Kissinger that we assassinate President Thieu. Kissinger indignantly rejected this, saying that it was criminal and dishonorable and the United States would have no part in it. Before those talks ended, I got involved with the Chinese. I brought Dr. Kissinger into France 15 times clandestinely without his ever seeing a French police, customs or immigration officer. I regard that as one of the major achievements in my life.

Q: *In 1972 you were appointed No. 2 at the CIA. At that point, as Watergate was just beginning to grow, the Nixon White House sought to roll the CIA through this — through you. Is that correct?*

A: (H.R.) Haldeman asked me to go to (FBI chief) L. Patrick Gray, and to tell him that further pursuit of the investigation in Mexico of laundered funds would uncover some intelligence operations or assets there. Now this may seem naive in retrospect, but when I was called into the office of the chief of staff of the president, I did not expect to be sent to do anything illegal. I went that afternoon right from that meeting to see Gray, then I came back to the CIA and I asked whether there was any possibility of anything going on in Mexico that could be exposed by the pursuit of this FBI investigation. And I was told that there was nothing.

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Q: *Who was the director at that time?*

A: Richard Helms. Now Helms was with me in Haldeman's office. That was on a Friday. On the next working day, a Monday, I was sent for by John Dean, counsel to the president, and he informed me that he was in charge of this whole matter and was in touch daily with Gray and so forth. And he asked me what the agency connection with the Watergate breakin was, and I said there was none, the agency is not involved in this matter. And he said but it must be, and I said it's not. And I presumed, again somewhat naively in retrospect, that he would tell Gray that there was no agency interest in this matter.

Q: *He didn't?*

A: He did not. The next day Dean sent for me again and said these people are wobbling, they may talk, and I said let them talk, there's nothing they can say that would affect us. So then he said, "could you pay their bail and their salaries while they're in jail out of secret funds?" and I said no way. I said "Mr. Dean, the only value this agency has to the president, the Congress and the American people is by remaining nonpartisan in politics. And if we were to do what you are requesting it would destroy the agency and I'm not prepared to do it." He said "what shall we do?" and I said "fire everybody connected with this." He leaned across the table and in a loud whisper, pointing his finger at me, he said "no one is going to be fired." I said "then, Mr. Dean, what is now a small, painful, conventional explosion will become a multimegaton hydrogen bomb, and people who are not now touched will be." The third day he called me again, and this time I refused again and said that if he attempted to pressure me any further I would resign and ask to see the president and tell him why I was resigning. I did not hear from Mr. Dean again.

Q: *How did Watergate affect the CIA's ability to operate in any normal way . . .*

A: It was not Watergate itself, but the Watergate thing was used largely by enemies of the agency to stir up feeling against the agency which led to the circus-like atmosphere in which these inquiries were conducted. Curiously, one of my biggest jobs was to keep our foreign friends at our side and I would say with some pride that not very many of them turned away from us during that very difficult period when we were putting on what the foreign services of other friendly countries regarded as a circus.

Q: *During this time there was much being revealed about the CIA and some of its individuals, its methods. Didn't this affect some of the foreign services about confiding in us?*

A: Some, but not as much as one would expect. They gauged the caliber of the people out there and found it to be very high and found that they could trust them not to give away their secrets even if we were giving away our own. The tragic part about that was the tremendous success that was achieved in making many Americans believe that the real threat to their freedom came not from the vast Soviet military and espionage apparatus, but from the very people who were defending the United States.

Q: *What about disclosures that came later on of certain assassination plots that took place within the agency?*

A: I do not have any personal knowledge. The period they're talking about was some 10 or 15 years before I came to the agency. I would just simply say this: that agency is a highly disciplined place, what these people were doing was what we call in military terms contingency planning. Every country has contingency plans for every possible war it might be called upon to fight, even the ones it doesn't intend to fight. There was contingency planning done in this area. There was no doubt in my mind that it was done in response to requests from higher authorities.

Q: *Would that include these rather bizarre efforts to develop chemicals that would make Castro's beard fall out?*

A: I don't want to go into the detail, but there is no question in my mind that this type of planning would not have been engaged in unless there was a sensing that this was desired at a higher level.